

Care of Ferrets

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Food (costs up to \$20 a month per ferret)

Ferrets are carnivores by nature. If your pet were a wild animal, he would consume other small animals whole. Their wild counterparts the Black Footed Ferret, weasel, stoat and mink are predators that consume rabbits, rodents, reptiles, fish and prairie dogs. For this reason, ferrets require a high quality diet.

In the past, it was thought that ferrets could be fed and sustained on a high quality cat food. Cat food simply does not meet the nutritional needs of a ferret and could cause urinary stones. Dog or cat food should NEVER be given to your ferret. The Ferret Aid Society recommends the use of 8 in 1 Ultimate (NOT *Ultra!*), Evo ferret, and/or Totally Ferret food. It is recommended that you mix a few ferret foods together for a balance of proper protein and essential fatty acids. This also ensures that if you are unable to find one of the ferret foods your ferret is used to, there will always be another food available. Ferrets must be fed freely and ALWAYS have food & water readily available to them. A healthy ferret will consume 8-10 small meals a day.

Ferrets require a high fat and protein diet with little to no fibre. Cat and kitten foods are too high in fibre and too low in protein and fat. Ferrets do not have a caecum (pouch where the large intestine starts which enables us to digest fibre), so their tiny bodies do not utilise fibre. The more fibre the ferret eats the more poops it produces and the less nutrient it absorbs. Fat in their diet should be at least 25%, Animal protein at 38% and fibre no more than 1.5%.

It is possible to maintain ferrets on a diet consisting of small pre killed rodents. While most people couldn't stomach this, many ferret owners swear by this type of feed as a healthy snack. If you choose this type of diet, pinkies (baby mice or rats) do not meet the nutritional requirements of ferrets. Only juvenile (already have fur and open eyes when killed) rodents meet the necessary dietary needs of a ferret.

Water

Clean, fresh, preferably filtered or spring water should be left available to ferrets at all times. It is preferred to use both a water bottle and a heavy porcelain bowl of water. Ferrets like to play with their water and enjoy the OCCASIONAL (no more than 3 times a year) bath.

People Food

Most human foods are not good for ferrets. Anything containing sugar or dairy can be harmful to your ferret. Diabetes can occur if the pancreas is made to digest too much sugar. This used to be a rare disease in the pet ferret, but many veterinarians are seeing more and more of this. High starch foods have also been linked to Insulinoma. There are many ferret foods available now that are considered low-carb.

Food allergies are not common in ferrets, but when they are found, they could be deadly. Watch for any signs of vomiting after giving your pet a treat. Any cooked fish or par-boiled meat is a great supplement to your ferret's diet. No egg whites please, it can cause anaemia. Egg yolk is a great treat for ferrets though. Many owners also give their ferrets raw, cut up chicken wings. Tuna should be avoided at all costs. It is very high in mercury and even humans should only consume this fish in moderation.

Many ferret books and web sites state that ferrets love raisins. While this is true, recent studies show that raisins or grapes can cause renal failure in ferrets (as well as dogs) and can be deadly. DO NOT feed your ferret raisins or any other fruits, vegetables or grains!

Before your ferret becomes ill

Goo or baby food is a must! If your ferret were to become ill, many times they will refuse to eat their kibble diet. For this reason, most of the ferrets in our shelter have already been exposed to baby food or "goo". We use ONLY Heinz (or if in the USA, Gerber) chicken with Broth baby food. Get your ferret used to eating this as soon as you bring them home. It could save their life one day. Most ferrets take to it quite easily, but many need days or even weeks of coaxing. Simply take the baby food on your finger and rub it gently on their gums. You'll have to do this for a while to allow the ferret to get used to the taste and then they will love it!

Start a bank account. Many ferret owners are faced with emergency vet bills at some point in their ferret's life. There is nothing worse than the helpless feeling of not having the money to cope with your ferret's medical needs. We suggest putting aside at least \$50 per month, per ferret into a separate bank account so that you will be prepared for the unexpected medical emergency. There is NO pet insurance for ferrets in Canada.

Supplements and other requirements

As mentioned before, ferrets require a high fat diet. Many ferret owners choose to use Ferretone as a supplement to their ferret's diet. It makes for a softer coat and is a great treat or tool to clip the ferret's nails. Just add a few drops of Ferretone on your ferret's belly and allow them to lick as you trim their nails. Be sure to cut your Ferretone 50/50 with a non-cholesterol vegetable oil, as it's a bit high in vitamin A. Evening Primrose oil and Flax Seed oil are also healthy alternatives.

Hairballs and other obstructions are very common in ferrets. They can also be deadly. If a ferret has a hairball or other blockage, the symptoms are; lack of appetite, not drinking, lethargy & lack of stool. Any of these symptoms warrant a trip to the veterinarian immediately! If your ferret has not had stool for more than 12 hours, there is trouble. We recommend the regular use of a cat hairball laxative (up to 4x per week during shedding season). This can help prevent hairballs from interfering with your pet's health.

Cage

With the domestic ferret's growing popularity and their numbers nearing 10 Million in North America, there is so much to choose from. Basic needs are a 3 feet by 2-foot hard floored cage per ferret (providing your ferret is allowed at least 3 hours of out-of-cage-time. For multiple ferrets, there are some nice 2, 3 & 4 level cages available on the market. Your ferret is a very active animal and needs a large enough cage to provide room for relaxation and play while you are away. Ferrets should NEVER be housed

outside. They are very susceptible to heat stroke and will die from this quite readily. The Canadian winter is too harsh for ferrets as well. They are susceptible to frost bite as well.

Sleeping area

An enclosed sleeping area is Necessary for you ferret's peace of mind. Many cubby-holes are now available to suit your ferret's needs. Old sweatshirts, T-shirts and baby blankets are also needed for your ferret's sleeping area. Please do not use wood chips of any kind in your ferret's cage. To do so can cause deadly results. Wood shavings can cause upper respiratory disease in ferrets. This type of illness can be deadly.

Litter box

Ferrets can be litter trained completely in their cages. However, most ferrets will have accidents while running throughout the house. It is VERY hard to completely litter train a ferret but it can be done. Clumping or clay litter is not recommended for use with ferrets. They tend to play in a newly cleaned litter box and tiny particles of the clay can be lodged in a ferret's nostril causing infection and death. Please use a pellet form of litter like Yesterday's News.

Toys

Safe toys for your ferret are Chew Weasels, hard dog toys, nylon rope, Kongs, balls with bells inside and any polar fleece toys. Ferrets can chew rubber very easily and it can cause a blockage that can be deadly so please stay away from these types of toys. Never give your pet any soft rubber cat toys.

Enrichment

Ferrets are HIGHLY intelligent animals. They require much stimulation to keep happy, healthy and free of boredom. A ferret that is not enriched can become stressed. Stress almost always leads to health issues or emotional problems. It is imperative you spend a lot of quality time with your ferret to prevent this. Signs of stress include pacing in the cage, banging on cage bars, chewing clothing, bedding or other cloth, biting, over sleeping and other behavioural issues.

There are many things you can do to help enrich the lives of your ferrets. Please talk to one of our volunteers for suggestions.

Vaccinations

Canine Distemper is nearly 100% fatal in ferrets. In the SLIGHT chance they do survive, brain damage is very evident. For this reason we recommend that your ferret be vaccinated for this virus. Even if your ferret never leaves the house, it is possible to bring home the virus on your shoes and clothing. FerrvacD is the only approved Canine Distemper vaccine available for use in ferrets. However, we have seen a high reaction rate in ferrets using this vaccine. Many veterinarians throughout North America and ferret owners are choosing to use GalaxyD or PureVax instead. While PureVax is licensed for use in ferrets, Galaxy is not, so please discuss the vaccine pros & cons with your veterinarian before making the switch. In any case, you should remain at your vet's office for at least 30 minutes after your pet has been vaccinated to insure prompt care should your pet have a reaction.

Rabies is highly uncommon in ferrets. There has also never been a reported case where a ferret transmitted rabies to a human. But, your pet must still be vaccinated against this virus. This is 100% fatal and there is no treatment. If your ferret was to bite someone, they will be placed under quarantine for 10 days providing they have the vaccine. The ONLY vaccine that should be used on your ferret is IMRAB. This is a killed virus vaccine.

Medical Problems

Anaemia

Female ferrets MUST be spayed in order to prevent this deadly form of Anaemia. If the female ferret goes into her heat cycle, she will stay in heat until she is fixed, bred or dies. During the heat cycle, the female's estrogen levels become very high and begin damaging the bone marrow. At this point the bone marrow stops producing white and red blood cells. The condition comes on slowly and often without symptoms. By the time symptoms occur it is often too late to save the female's life, despite therapy from a veterinarian. Thankfully, since most ferrets are spayed/neutered at the time of purchase, this type of estrogen toxicity is becoming very rare.

A female ferret that has Adrenal Disease may also develop anaemia.

Descenting

Descenting is not a necessary procedure. The Ferret Aid Society STRONGLY opposes descenting your ferrets unless it's for a valid medical reason. Descenting your ferret will not change the way he/she smells. Neutering/spaying is all that needs to be done. Unaltered males produce a very strong odour to attract their female counterpart. Some of this smell is obtained from the male bathing in his urine, while most of the smell is due to the production of hormones in the skin. When a female goes into heat, her smell is slightly more tolerable. Non-descented ferrets will "poof" if in fear of being attacked, angered or over-excited. This "poof" is much like human flatulence and smells like rotten eggs. The smell dissipates naturally after about 5 minutes and does not stain clothing or furniture. They do not spray scent like their cousin the skunk. *** If you have adopted a non-descented ferret from our shelter, you MUST have their anal glands expressed at least once a year to avoid impaction. ***

Parasites

Ferrets get fleas & ticks just like other mammals. If your pet has them, please use a flea shampoo that is safe for cats. Heartworm has also been affecting ferrets around North America. It is carried by the common mosquito and is preventable by using the same medication used in dogs.

Ear mites are common in ferrets and usually come from other household pets or from taking walks outside with your ferret. It is easily taken care of by using Ivermectin drops in your ferret's ears (available though your Vet). This type of mite is very itchy to your ferret and can cause hearing loss and in worst case ear drum damage if not taken care of.

Heart Worm can also be a concern. Depending on where you live and whether or not you take your ferrets outdoors, you should speak to your veterinarian to see if using a heartworm preventative would benefit you. To date, there have been no cases of heartworm in Ontario ferrets.

There are many other parasites your ferret can catch. We **STRONGLY** recommend that if you touch or handle another animal (including other ferrets) that you change your clothing and take a shower **BEFORE** handling your own ferrets.

Viruses (cost to treat – up to \$500)

Ferrets are susceptible to human strains of the flu. Just like in humans, the flu can be deadly to a ferret. They often have the same symptoms as we do like a runny nose, watery eyes, sneezing and lethargy. Sometimes your ferret will go off his/her food. If this happens, we recommend a trip to the vet. “Goo” (or baby food) can also be helpful to a sick ferret. Please ask the shelter for a Goo recipe just for ferrets. If your ferret becomes extremely lethargic or stops eating everything, please see your veterinarian.

ADV (cost to treat – undetermined)

Aleutians Disease Virus is not a new virus to our furry friends. In the last year there has been a rise on reported cases of ADV in the ferret community in the USA. To date, there have been only four confirmed cases of ADV in Canadian ferrets (all in Ontario in 2006). We believe there are many more cases in Canada but veterinarians aren't making the test for ADV a regular exam so we're not finding it. There is no cure for ADV and it is important you talk with your veterinarian about regular testing for ADV with your ferret. Testing is easy and can be done through the University of Guelph (\$40) or www.avecon.com (\$12 US)

Blockages (cost to treat - up to \$2,000)

As stated before, hairballs are the most common blockage in ferrets. Other forms of blockages can be foam, rubber, plastic, cotton and in some cases material from towels or other bedding. The signs of a foreign body blockage vary depending where the object is lodged inside the intestine. Some of the signs are gradual weight loss, extreme depression or lethargy, vomiting, loss of appetite, dehydration, dark tarry stools or no stool. If any of these signs are present in your ferret, they must be brought to a veterinary immediately! To wait even a few more hours could prove fatal to your pet. Often surgery must be performed to dislodge the object in your ferret's intestines or your pet will die. Blockages can occur in a ferret of ANY age.

Adrenal Disease (Cost to treat – up to \$2,000)

Adrenal disease is **very** common in ferrets. It can affect ferrets from as young as 1 year old to 8 years old. It is a wasting disease. More often than not it can be cured through surgery. Symptoms include hair loss, a “pot” belly appearance, swollen vulva in a spayed female, spot peeing, aggression towards other ferrets and mounting behaviour in neutered males. In the female ferret with Adrenal Disease, anaemia is often present. Males suffer with blocked prostates which can cause the urine to back up into the kidneys, causing irreversible damage.

******The shelter has been noticing many ferrets with Adrenal Disease are not showing the typical hair loss pattern associated with the disease. Please watch your ferret closely for any minor changes (in males – course fur, smaller urine output, dragging his penis over objects such as shoes, toys and tubes, sexual mounting where the male will bite another

ferret or toy on the back of the neck. In females – course fur or ANY change in the appearance of her vulva. It's up to you, the ferret owner to know your ferret's regular behaviour. ANY change in your ferret's normal routine should warrant a trip to the vet)**

Treatments for curing or managing Adrenal Disease include Lupron, Cryosurgery (freezing the cells with liquid nitrogen to kill cells) laser surgery and regular adrenalectomy. In the short term, Lupron is the cheapest source of treatment. NO studies have shown that Lupron cures the illness. In the long run, Lupron becomes far less cost effective. 1 year of Lupron therapy can successfully pay for an adrenalectomy.

Though there is a blood test to determine if your ferret has Adrenal Disease, in our opinion it is not worth the \$300 price tag. If it looks adrenal, smells adrenal, seems adrenal, chances are it IS adrenal. Spend the money on treatment, not on diagnostics. There are times where the blood test is important but not for a diagnosis. We only suggest it in cases where surgery and medical treatment have failed and a new approach is needed to come up with a proper drug cocktail.

ECE

This corona virus has swiped across the nation and into Canada. It's a diarrheal virus that slowly eats away the lining of the ferret's intestine preventing it from absorbing nutrient. It has a very low mortality rate in treated ferrets, but can be deadly to untreated ferrets or older ferrets with pre existing conditions. Currently, there is no vaccine for this virus. In most American States, ECE is not seen anymore due to wide-spread infection and recuperation. In Canada (particularly Ontario) with the masses of Please talk with your veterinarian about ECE.

Cancer

There are so many different types of cancer your ferret can get. Of them, the most common is Lymphosarcoma. This type of cancer affects all the organs and in some cases the spinal cord. Chemotherapy is sometimes used to treat this condition. Early signs of this disease include, but are not limited to: staring into space, lethargy, depression & sudden collapse during play.

Insulinoma

This type of disease is manageable through surgery and Prednisone. Tiny insulin producing tumours attach themselves to the ferret's pancreas and release bursts of insulin causing your ferret to have spells of weakness, seizures or other symptoms. Watch for a "speed bump" ferret, gazing off into space. Have your ferret's blood glucose levels checked.

Veterinary visits

It is important to have your ferret seen by a veterinarian yearly. Not just for its annual shots, but for an exam and physical too. By the time your ferret is 4 we also recommend that you take yearly x-rays and blood tests. This way, you are up to date with your ferret's complete health and can watch for slight changes over the years. At 6, your ferret should be seen every 6 months with blood tests and x-rays. Early diagnosis of any disease allows for early treatment and a longer happier life with your pet.

Enjoy your new ferret and if you have any questions, please feel free to contact the shelter!

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